

# Nihilent Technologies: Getting into the Consumer's Mind

L.C. Singh, Global Vice Chairman and CEO, explains how Nihilent is taking the lead in Design Thinking to help understand not just what your customers want, but their aspirations and dreams.

-By Sekhar Seshan



Entrance to the Lab

“Will you walk into my parlour?” said the Spider to the Fly” - Mary Howitt, poet, 1828. Concealed microphones. A wall of mirrored glass which is actually a one-way observation panel. Comfortable sofas. Polite men and women ushering you to a comfortable seating and offering you water and tea or coffee. Sounds like an interrogation room for suspected spies, doesn't it? It is!

The big difference, as L.C. Singh, Global Vice Chairman and CEO of the Pune-headquartered Nihilent Technologies points out, is that before you are invited in, you are told that that you will be watched, and your responses and reactions to carefully-asked questions monitored and recorded in the next room. The whole purpose, he explains, is to understand what you as a customer aspire to possess as you move on to the next level – be it in software, furniture, art, kitchen fittings and equipment, or anything else.

Having set up what he modestly says is ‘probably’ the only Design Centre of its kind in India, LC as he is known throughout the infotech industry says this is the way all 44 marketers now have to go, whatever they may be trying to sell. “The day is gone when someone who wanted to create any product would use an internal think-tank, or call in top-level consultants, to brainstorm and decide inside air-conditioned conference rooms what you need,” he asserts. “Over the last five years, your power as a consumer has grown multiple-fold – and this growth has been driven mainly by your mobile phone.”

Driven by the propagators of ‘best practices’ in the world (“read, the US!” Singh says), this system led to the consumer being bombarded with a range of products that the ‘experts’ had decided was best for him or her. And people had perforce to choose from these. But customer dissatisfaction is rampant. “In my mind, the phenomenon of the proliferation of call centres

is proof of this mismatch between what the consumer wants and what she gets," LC says. "Suddenly, she discovered that she no longer had to just call a number and complain, she could go public on social media – and did."

As this awareness and trend started growing and mushrooming, it has started affecting the call centres and consumer consultants. "Everything is under the consumer's scanner, so the only strategy must be from the consumer," LC says. "And that is the origin of design thinking. What the great management guru Peter Drucker said about any action needing to be for the customer, that you should depend on nobody else, has taken almost 40 years to be translated."

Design Thinking, as the Nihilent website defines it, is an iterative human-centred approach to problem-solving. "In conventional design methods, very peripheral or scrappy research on the problem is seen as enough to craft a product or service. However, in Design Thinking it is mandatory that we observe, interact and immerse in the environment and experience the problems ourselves before we begin designing/prototyping a solution."

How else, as LC asks, can a marketer immerse himself or herself into the life of the customer? This is a vital necessity to understand the stages of a need, which is today's; a want, which is all set to become a need; and, finally, an aspiration - which is what your dream about. There are great examples from around the world, he points out: international hardware and software giants, which kill their own products even when they are doing well in the marketplace, to introduce aspirational products long before the need becomes apparent - even to the customer. "They're known to marketers as the 'frightful five' - are all US-based, and all consumer-driven," he explains. "The consumer becomes the king, literally, in designing the product and service for today as well as for the future."

Design Thinking is especially relevant when CEOs and business leaders think of adopting digital transformation as means to improve their customer interactions and create customer loyalty by continually meeting their needs and aspirations. It is about internalising the people's difficulties today, understanding and defining



Aisle of the Lab

the underlined issues and then using innovative techniques to create alternative designs and prototypes from among which they can choose.

All this will, of course, have a logical fallout: the automation or minimisation of call centres, because complaints are the result of a mismatch between what the customer wants - or expects - and what the company gives. The high-profile (and highly-paid) consultancy practices will also see a drastic decline in demand.

The laboratory in Nihilent's Design Centre plays a role in various defined stages before it pronounces readiness to create a product and jumping into the real world. First, it scans the environment and looks at the context. Here LC's love of wildlife and photographing it come into play: "take, for example, designing to meet the food habits of a tiger in the Pench resort, as against one in a zoo," he grins. Our 'cat sense' lab senses changes that it sees as a risk - just like a cat which knows the real meaning of the phrase "curiosity kills a cat" - and experiments with things before adopting what the customer finds comfortable.

The second stage is to 'bring on the customer' - a representative set of customers, who are 'interviewed' not by asking questions but by carrying on a continuous dialogue, with casual discussions. All reactions are observed for risk assessment, gauging their concerns and inhibitions.



The room used for interviewing customers and users. Here a design consultant from Nihilent interacts with Mrs. S Kohli



Dr. F.C. Kohli inaugurating the Nihilent User Experience Laboratory

Third comes defining and creating a customer functionality: innovation by deciding which combination of technologies to use, how to present the product to the user in the best way. "You create a mock-up, including a 3-D model when necessary, to show to the customer. Then follows immersive research into how happy the customer is, and the creation of a user persona to define the features that need to be incorporated into the product.

To test the results, the lab simulates the entire environment – "except for going and living with the consumer!" LC quips. This brings down the possibility of a bad post-launch shock. There is usually a very high failure risk of 97.75 per cent, which can be decreased significantly. At that level, he points out, even small changes can bring massive savings in product design, manufacture and marketing. This is all thanks to the fact that customer involvement in creating the product or service has been almost total, he adds.

LC propagates the advantages of Design Thinking with a number of service offerings, including a two-hour session on Design Thinking Introduction to CXOs, to introduce the concept of Empathy, Emotion, and Experience in Design Thinking; a three-day Workshop on Design Thinking for leadership and middle-management teams to demonstrate its value in areas of product and service design, which is



LC Singh interacting with Mrs & Dr. FC Kohli, along with Mr. Yash Pal Sahni and Mr. Kiran Deshpande

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Proof-of-Concept (POC) driven and also has a hands-on approach to go on to the field and empathise with end-customers and users using the tools that are taught in the workshop; a six-to-nine-month Problem-solving project, where the customer identifies a critical challenge in their business that needs to be addressed, and the Nihilent team works with the customer's project team using all the Design Thinking methodologies, tools, and frameworks related to empathy workshops, persona design, customer journey mapping, experience design, usability testing and branding through emotional connect.

Also on offer is a CXO Breakfast Session, where CXOs can learn about and practise alternative paths to leadership and innovation by applying Design Thinking tools to strategy, product, innovation, and engagement, by really understanding the customer; bringing empathy to the organisation; designing in real time; and acting quickly. They go through a condensed and simple approach to practise Design Thinking tools and techniques, such as customer interviews, ideation, rapid prototype development through an iterative, collaborative process of getting and applying feedback.

"I am also designing a three-day intensive programme in Design Thinking with a design company, for physical design," LC says. "In essence, the rules are the same as for software design. Here, too, the aspiration of the customer must be understood for innovation to happen."

As Anurag Vohra, Senior VP and Head, India business, at Kirloskar Brothers Ltd, says in a client testimonial quoted on the website: "Absolutely fascinating!"